

Your Weekly Business Bulletin from Thanet & East Kent Chamber

Thanet & East Kent Insider

25th September 2009

1. Business Rates

A senior decision-maker from the government's Valuation Office Agency who is responsible for setting the ratable value of East Kent properties addressed Chamber members last Tuesday at a business breakfast in the splendid surroundings of Salmestone Grange, Margate. He outlined the current ratings regime for businesses which came into force in April 2005 based on a valuation date of 1 April 2003. The VOA is currently analysing rental values on 1st April 2008 in order to fix a new ratings regime effective from 1st April 2010. The revisions will cover the charges levied on beach huts, public toilets, offices, shops, warehouses, factories, storage facilities, garden centres, surgeries and all commercial premises.

2. More About Business Rates

A "Review of the Valuation Office Agency 2009" published on 10 June 2009 roundly praised its operations and noted the 93% satisfaction score for 2008/9. There was a particular tribute for the integrity of the Council Tax and Non-Domestic Rating list, a sharp contrast to the data management history of some other government departments. One of the few quibbles was that "More commercial awareness could benefit both the Agency and its customers". Last Tuesday's Chamber breakfast meeting provided a perfect opportunity for Chamber members to voice their concerns about certain market sectors. Pubs merited especial attention. With a tax regime that directs drinkers towards cheap beer and spirits in supermarkets rather than the supervised drinking on licensed premises offered by pubs, the owners and managers of our East Kent pubs are naturally concerned that a new ratings system will not accelerate the pace of closures of these much loved British institutions. Over 2,200 were forced to close in the last financial year and a sharp increase in rate demands would undoubtedly lead to more social problems from greater beer sales at anonymous check out counters and fewer under the watchful eye of a responsible publican. It was our understanding from the meeting that East Kent pubs would receive a sympathetic examination that did not rely uniquely on floor space and rental values. It was enlightening to learn that rates for shops are generally calculated on floor space and distance from the front of the shop. Thus, the first twenty feet inside the shop back from the street frontage counts as Zone A and, as an example, might be rated at £100 per sq. ft. The next twenty feet to the rear would then be rated at £50 per sq ft and the third set of twenty feet at £25 per sq ft.

3. Yet Even More About Business Rates

And why not? It is a statutory charge for nearly every enterprise in East Kent. This Chamber has campaigned tirelessly to make a special case for East Kent based on the need to regenerate the area, the deleterious effects of the Rating (Empty Properties) Act 2007 and the published deprivation statistics showing Thanet to have the highest number of unemployed in Kent; Margate has the greatest percentage of empty shops in Britain. We simply do not know the effect of our campaigning but we do know that present thinking by the government in very broad terms favours a reduction for Thanet of the order of 5% and an increase of 10% for businesses in London with other areas somewhere in between. The effect on individual companies may vary but bearing in mind the current stresses on public finances, such a result is probably the best we could expect.

4. Green Is Good

Gordon Gekko's famous remark in the film Wall Street that 'greed, for lack of a better word, is good' has been proved to be as ill advised for the world's banks as his claim that 'lunch is for wimps' is for your health. A slogan of Green Is Good on the other hand might be a more worthwhile declaration, especially if it can reduce your costs and boost your income. That is the claim by Peter Walton of Chamber member Lean2Green and he makes a powerful argument that companies in East Kent can boost their profits by adopting policies and processes that are both kinder to the environment and more acceptable to their staff. In a beautifully scripted one page summary, Peter Walton writes, "By adopting the principles of maximum efficiency, minimising waste and significantly reducing over-production, businesses in East Kent can make the difference." This should appeal to every company struggling to balance principles with pay. Peter adds, "Adopting the Green Agenda should mean more than simply working with awareness and a conscience. It should also be about adopting modern business practices to realise significant financial benefits for you, the local area and the long term future of our diverse eco systems." For a copy of the text, email admin@tekc.co.uk with the subject line "Adopt the Green Agenda". For more details and a technical explanation of Six Sigma, contact Peter direct by email to peter.walton@lean2green.co.uk or view his website at www.lean2green.co.uk. If you think it is only large companies that benefit from a lean approach, think again. We leave the last words to Peter, "Most companies who employ lean consultants are large – maybe that should tell you something"

5. Mindful Employers

Mental health is an uneasy topic for many employers. Seeing on a CV that a job candidate has suffered from severe depression may be unattractive, finding this out after the employment contract has been signed could be even more painful. But it does not have to be that way. Anyone who attended the recent Kent Mindful Employer Conference at Oakwood House, Maidstone will recall for a long

time the presentation given by Louise Jessup who returned to work after 25 years on incapacity benefit due to mental health problems. She now works part-time for Tesco and has started her own creative textile business. Her speech was characterised by an impeccable delivery, sharp wit and a classic structure of beginning, middle and end. Louise showed that grappling with previous mental problems can produce a solid base on which to build a worthwhile career. The conference facilitator, Barbra Sturgeon, was among those who congratulated Louise. Barbara should know. Not only is she famed for her BBC broadcasts on difficult subjects as in the Folkestone Mind Centre programme but as an official Ambassador for Kent and Vice President of Dave Lee's Happy Holidays, she is more aware than most of the sufferings of Kent citizens who do not conform to a stereotypical job candidate profile. This conference lived up to its promise in showing that "the wellbeing and sustainability of your business relies on the wellbeing and effectiveness of your staff".

6. Present But Vacant

The Sainsbury Centre for Mental Health estimates that the cost of mental health issues on the UK taxpayer in 2006/7 amounted to £35 billion a year, around 7.2% of the total tax burden. The effect on small companies is severe. We all know how costly absenteeism can be when a key worker takes a week off, but the Sainsbury Centre calculates that presenteeism is nearly twice as expensive for the average company. Presenteeism is when the worker stays in your shop in Northdown Road and underperforms. The lesson for East Kent companies is clearly to look after your staff, avoid stigmatising attitudes, prevent reputational damage that will disengage workers and clients and be aware of a legal duty of care under health and safety legislation that could prove costly if ignored. Becoming a Mindful Employer is one way to protect yourself against future difficulties.

7. What is a Mindful Employer?

Full details of the Mindful Employer scheme supported by Kent County Council, Nationwide and EDF energy are available on the website at www.mindfulemployer.net. The local Kent branch office is managed by Lynn Marchant who will not be stressed to hear from interested companies. Lynn's email address is lynn.marchant@kmpt.nhs.uk. Alternatively, she will be equally at ease and delighted to receive a call to her mobile on 07881 816232. Brian Thornton of the Exeter Chamber of Commerce is very much in favour of the Mindful Employer approach. As he puts it, "We have a wealth of latent talent waiting to be brought back into the workplace and, taking a pragmatic approach, this helps overcome the current shortage of employees in the area." Things may be different in the West Country than in East Kent, we grow the apples and they drink the cider, but Louise Jessup, see item 4, is living proof that you don't have to be Winston Churchill or Spike Milligan to triumph over bouts of depression.

8. Never Volunteer

Fortunately, the old army adage that you should never volunteer does not apply to thousands of community minded citizens that give up their free time to support organisations in East Kent. There were no long-winded speeches from Smashie and Nicey types talking about 'chairidee' at the Thanet Voluntary and Community Sector Forum at The Pavilion Broadstairs earlier this week. Under the spirited chairmanship of Steve Ward and the superb organisational management of Lisa-Maria Browning, the Autumn Conference limited speakers to a lively ten minutes each; an inspired format that ensures that all delegates are kept interested and informed throughout. Action with Communities in Rural Kent was represented by Nigel Whitburn who gave an overview of the grants of up to £15,000 available to 'any properly constituted group' that can produce a project that 'will significantly improve the quality of life for rural people'. In liaison with the Colyer-Fergusson Charitable Trust, these Small Project Grants are available to communities in the districts of Ashford, Canterbury, Dover, Swale and Thanet until April 2011. Applications are reviewed every two months. For details, telephone 01303 813790.

9. Thanet Works

This Chamber in conjunction with Thanet Earth has been commissioned by Thanet Works to produce a report on private sector participation in the Working Neighbourhoods Fund allocated to Thanet. Any Chamber member in the private sector with a particular view is invited to email admin@tekc.co.uk with the subject line "Thanet Works Viewpoint". All submissions will be carefully considered.

10. Fire & Smoke Alarms

Kent Fire & Rescue Service tells the Chamber that there were 13 fire deaths in Kent and Medway in the year from April 2008. In five of these cases, no smoke alarm was fitted and in two a fitted alarm was not operational. All thirteen fatalities involved people over 40 years of age and the majority were at least 65 years old. This does not mean that if you are under 40 years old there is no need for concern, but it does mean that vulnerable people leading independent lives need to exercise special care. Kent Fire & Rescue Service provides and fits smoke alarms free of charge as part of a Home Safety Visit Service. If any member of your staff or their families cares for an elderly or disabled person, you might like to bring the Home Safety Visit Team to their attention. The free help line number is 0800 923 7000.

11. Milligan and Wiseman

It is well-known that Spike Milligan suffered from severe depression or Bipolar Disorder. We have referred before in the Insider to his gravestone in Winchelsea which is marked in Irish with the words "I told you I was ill". What is less well known is that he is

credited by the celebrated psychologist Professor Wiseman and others as the author of the most amusing story ever told which received its first airing on a Goon Show in 1951. In a more recent version it reads, "A couple of hunters were out in the woods hunting rabbits with their shotguns when one of them fell to the ground. He didn't seem to be breathing; his eyes were rolled back in his head. The other hunter took out his mobile phone and called the emergency services. He gasped to the operator in desperation, "My friend is dead. What can I do?" The operator said, "Keep calm now. Just take it easy. I can help you. First of all, let's make sure he's dead." There was a silence followed by a loud bang. The hunter returned to his mobile and said, "OK, now what?". Pure genius.

11. Our Sponsors

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